

# **SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT)**

**FRIDAY, 28 MARCH 2025 at 9.30 AM  
ROOM 106, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

**APPROVED**

## **Present:**

**Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive  
Steven Baxter, Director of Corporate Services  
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services  
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services**

## **In Attendance:**

**Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor  
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support  
(Items 5 and 6)  
Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Items 7, 8, 9 and 11)  
Gary Browne, Senior Accountant (Item 10)  
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Items 13, 14 and 16)  
Gillian Kane, Senior Research Officer (Item 13)  
Catherine McIntosh, Organisational Development & Learning Manager  
(Item 14)  
Simon Kelly, Legal Adviser (Item 17)  
Donna-Marie Clark, Data Protection and Governance Officer (Items 18,  
19, 20 and 21)  
Dan Hull, Chair of the Internal Communications Group (Item 24)**

The meeting commenced at 9.33 am.

### **1. Apologies**

It was noted that Gareth McGrath would not be in attendance for the start of the meeting.

### **2. Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **3. Minutes of previous meeting**

It was noted that the minutes from the meeting on 28 February 2025 had been published.

#### **4. SMT Action Points**

The outstanding action points were reviewed and progress was noted.

*Robin Ramsey joined the meeting at 9.36 am.*

#### **5. Political Update**

SMT noted that the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill was progressing well, with the committee stage nearing conclusion.

SMT reflected on recent media discussions in relation to MLAs and online abuse.

#### **6. Draft Assembly Commission Agenda**

Robin Ramsey advised that the next Assembly Commission meeting had been scheduled for 9 April 2025.

Proposed items for the meeting included:

- Clerk/Chief Executive's Report
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Review of the Financial Implications for Parties with Increased Employers' National Insurance Contributions Effective from 1 April 2025
- Review of the Use of Certain Members' Allowances Under the Assembly Members Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016
- Annual Plan 2024-2025 Status at 31 December 2024
- Temporary Agency Worker Contract – Proposed Increase to Contract Value
- Business Case for Renewal of Microsoft Enterprise Agreement 2025
- Appointment of a Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards
- Northern Ireland Assembly Comptroller and Auditor General – Salary Arrangements
- The Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Scheme (2016) Annual Report and Accounts and Triennial Actuarial Valuation
- Correspondence from the Executive Office on a Memorial to Victims of Historical Institutional Abuse
- Relocation of Official Portraits
- Request for the Assembly Commission to Display a Portrait of His Majesty the King
- Assembly Arrangements to Mark 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VE Day

*Robin Ramsey left the meeting at 9.45 am.*

## **CORPORATE SERVICES**

*Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 9.46 am for agenda items 7, 8, 9 and 11.*

*Change to agenda running order.*

### **8. The Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension (AMP) Scheme (2016) Annual Report and Accounts and Triennial Actuarial Valuation**

Paula McClintock presented and sought approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper on the AMP Scheme (2016) Annual Report and Accounts and Triennial Actuarial Valuation.

Paula advised that the draft 2023 triennial valuation report would be considered by the Pension Trustees at a meeting scheduled for 2 April 2025.

SMT considered the paper and approved it for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to the inclusion of the draft or finalised 2023 triennial valuation report.

*Gareth McGrath joined the meeting at 9.54 am.*

Steven Baxter highlighted the pressures being placed on Finance Office staff to provide admin support to Pension Trustees, and he stated if this service is to be provided it would be necessary to review the Finance Office structure. SMT noted the pressures but sought clarification on why this was the case given that pension administration outsourcing arrangements had been put in place a number of years previously and agreed to consider the issue further at a future meeting.

**Action:** Paula to prepare a paper for presentation to SMT at a future meeting on admin support to Pension Trustees.

### **7. Proposed Revisions to Calculations Included Within the Staff Handbook**

Paula presented a paper, which highlighted a small number of administrative changes to the Staff Handbook, to address legacy inconsistencies between the Handbook and actual payroll calculations.

Paula therefore proposed a revised approach to calculating rates of pay.

SMT agreed that the inconsistencies needed to be addressed and approved in principle, subject to receipt of legal advice, the proposed revisions to payroll calculations for daily rates of pay. SMT noted that consultation would need to be undertaken with Trade Union Side (TUS).

SMT also noted that the revisions would impact a number of other calculations, and it was agreed that Paula would carry out an in-depth review and prepare a further paper for consideration by SMT at a future meeting.

**Action:** Paula to request legal advice and carry out an in-depth review of policies potentially impacted by a change in the calculation of the daily rate of pay and prepare a further paper for consideration by SMT at a future meeting.

## **11. Review of the Use of Certain Allowances Under the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016**

Paula presented and sought approval of an Assembly Commission paper, outlining a number of changes to the Finance Office's administration processes, to give effect to the recommendations made in the review report on the use of certain allowances under the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016.

SMT thanked Paula for the excellent paper, and following consideration, approved it for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its meeting scheduled for 9 April 2025.

## **9. Annual Insurance Policy Renewal and Update**

Paula updated SMT on the existing insurance policies currently held by the Assembly Commission, the cover provided and the proposed renewal premiums.

Paula asked SMT to consider the proposal from the insurers for a renewed long-term agreement, and the current indemnity limits on the Combined Employer's and Public Liability policy, with a recommendation not to increase the limits at this time.

Following consideration, SMT agreed to proceed with the proposed renewal premiums as proposed; the commencement of a new two-year long-term agreement; and to retain the current limit of indemnity on the Combined Employer's and Public Liability policy.

Paula referred to a discussion during the insurance update provided at the SMT meeting in March 2024 on Defamation insurance cover for staff. She noted that research had shown that very few companies provided this cover and she therefore sought direction from SMT on whether she should proceed with seeking quotes.

Following discussion, SMT agreed that as it appeared prohibitive to obtain Defamation insurance cover, the Assembly Commission would self-insure in line with other public sector organisations.

Steven queried the need for this paper to be prepared and presented to SMT each year and it was agreed that going forward a paper was not required and that SMT would be updated on claims and policy changes via the Corporate Services Directors' Update, subject to the usual business case approval process.

*Paula McClintock left the meeting at 10.37 am.*

*Gary Browne joined the meeting at 10.39 am.*

## **10. Management Accounts February 2025**

Gary Browne presented the Management Accounts for February 2025, highlighting the forecast outturn for Resource DEL, Capital DEL and the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (WFDSC) costs.

SMT noted underspends against Administration Costs, Members' Costs and WFDSC costs.

Following a discussion on the staff salaries budget, Steven proposed that a higher-level approach to salary management is undertaken going forward, with business areas controlling the filling of vacancies that are within their staff complement. Steven also proposed reporting on the vacancy factor within the monthly management accounts presented to SMT. SMT was content with the proposed approach.

Gary sought approval of a bid for costs in relation to legal fees on settlement of the roof litigation case. SMT approved the bid.

On reviewing the Capital budget, Gary sought approval of bids to cover the cost of the framing of portraits and fees relating to the industrial dishwasher. SMT approved the bids and noted that the capital plan for 2025/26 would be updated accordingly.

SMT was advised of three projects on the Capital Plan for 2024/2025 that would not be completed in-year and approved requests for them to be added to the Capital Plan for 2025/2026.

*Gary Browne left the meeting at 11.02 am.*

*Meeting suspended at 11.02 am and resumed at 11.14 am.*

*Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 11.14 am for agenda items 13, 14 and 16.*

*Gillian Kane joined the meeting at 11.14 am for agenda item 13.*

## **13. Hybrid Working Policy Review 2025**

Sinéad McDonnell presented the Report arising from the Hybrid Working Policy Review.

Sinéad advised of a 58% survey response rate and stated that overall the findings of the Review were extremely positive, but that the level of satisfaction with the Policy did vary by grade.

Sinéad highlighted some comments that had been raised and it was agreed that the Report findings would be considered at the next meeting of the Assembly Leadership Team.

SMT also noted comments in relation to greater availability of hybrid meeting spaces in Parliament Buildings, that new equipment and furniture had been installed in B28, on a pilot basis and that it was intended to roll out this type of capability more widely.

SMT thanked Sinéad and Gillian for the work involved in running the survey and collating the findings.

*Gillian Kane left the meeting at 11.38 am.*

*Catherine McIntosh joined the meeting at 11.38 am for agenda item 14.*

#### **14. People and Culture Strategy: Update on Work Undertaken Since July 2024 and the Future Programme of Work**

Sinéad presented a paper updating SMT on the key projects being undertaken in relation to implementation of the People and Culture Strategy since July 2024.

SMT noted updates on the following projects:

- Establishment of an Organisational Development (OD)/Learning Team;
- Development and Implementation of Assembly Commission Leadership Competencies;
- Executive Coaching Programme;
- Mentoring Programme;
- Response to the 2024 Staff Survey;
- Review of Performance Conversations;
- Developing a Wellbeing Culture;
- Corporate Values in Action;
- Establishment of a Learning Network; and
- Development of a Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) Process

**Action:** Sinéad to arrange for an update on the key projects to be communicated to staff.

Sinéad highlighted challenges impacting the projects, namely, the absence of a Learning Management System and the administration of Directorate training.

In relation to a Learning Management System, Steven advised that SMT should shortly be receiving recommendations from the supplier engaged to

review the Assembly Commission's corporate systems and processes and that this should prove informative.

In relation to training, Sinéad proposed that the responsibility for purchasing business area related training be passed back to the relevant business area, with a trial of this approach being undertaken. SMT was content with this approach, but asked that Heads of Business (HoBs) be consulted.

Sinéad also referred to potential external support to assist with the implementation of the People and Culture Strategy, and sought approval from SMT. SMT was content.

SMT thanked Sinéad and the OD/Learning Team for the great work that had been done in progressing the projects thus far.

*Catherine McIntosh left the meeting at 12.14 pm.*

## **16. HR Management Information**

Sinéad presented the monthly HR Management Information as at 1 March 2025.

Sinéad referred to the Temporary Worker Contract, and sought approval, in principle, to a further 12-month extension from 28 June 2025 to 27 June 2026 and additional contract expenditure to cover the period of the extension.

Following consideration, SMT approved, in principle, the extension and additional contract expenditure, subject to Assembly Commission approval, as the value exceeded the Clerk/Chief Executive's delegated authority.

**Action:** Sinéad to prepare a paper on the extension of the Temporary Worker Contract, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 9 April 2025.

On reviewing the Recruitment Schedule, SMT agreed that a competition for Librarian should be added and the Research and Information Service (RaISe) General Manager competition removed.

*Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 12.35 pm.*

## **LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH SERVICES**

*Simon Kelly joined the meeting at 12.36 pm for agenda item 17.*

## **17. Litigation Update**

Simon Kelly provided SMT with details on litigation to which the Assembly Commission is currently a named party.

*Simon Kelly left the meeting at 12.46 pm.*

*Donna-Marie Clark joined the meeting at 12.46 pm for items 18, 19, 20 and 21.*

## **18. Quarterly Review of the Corporate Risk Register**

Donna-Marie Clark advised that she had met with the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors on 12 March 2025, to discuss the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) in detail.

SMT noted and approved the CRR for March 2025.

Donna-Marie advised that the CRR would be published on AsslSt and presented to the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee at its meeting in May 2025.

## **19. Biennial Review of Personal Data Breach Management Plan**

Donna-Marie Clark presented the Personal Data Breach Management Plan, highlighting some proposed minor changes.

Following consideration, SMT approved the proposed changes and requested some further minor changes, namely, to update contacts with mobile telephone numbers and a change in process in the event of a personal data breach, that only the Clerk/Chief Executive, the Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services, the Data, Protection and Governance Officer and the Director whose area the breach relates to need attend a meeting.

SMT approved the revised plan for publication on AsslSt and for sharing with Information Asset Owners, subject to the further updates requested.

**Action:** Donna-Marie to update the Plan as requested by SMT and arrange for it to be published on AsslSt and shared with Information Asset Owners.

## **20. Sensitivity Review**

Donna-Marie provided a verbal update on the Sensitivity Review 2004/2005 Release.

Donna-Marie advised that there are currently 11 files overdue for transfer to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), with all files at approvals stage.

**Action:** Donna-Marie to prepare a paper on the Sensitivity Review 2004/2005 Release for presentation at the SMT meeting scheduled for 2 May 2025.

## **21. Business Case Options to Implement Electronic Document Record Management**

This paper is to be cleared by correspondence.

*Donna-Marie Clark left the meeting at 12.58 pm.*

*Meeting suspended at 12.58 pm and resumed at 1.54 pm.*

## **22. Governance Support Staff Resource**

Tara Caul presented a paper seeking to increase the staff complement of the Information Standards Office by one Clerical Supervisor, as per a recent Internal Audit recommendation regarding additional governance staff resource.

Tara outlined the pressures within the Information Standards Office and need for an additional staff resource, but acknowledged that currently there was no budget for this resource.

Following discussion, SMT agreed, in principle, to the increase, subject to consideration of the available staffing budget in the April 2025 management accounts presented at the May SMT meeting.

## **PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES**

### **23. Strategic Communications Update**

SMT noted a communications update provided by the Acting Head of Communications.

SMT was delighted with the positive feedback around International Women's Day; the traction of the Youth Assembly and the good work being done to promote the work of committees.

SMT recorded its thanks to the Communications Team.

## **OTHER ITEMS**

*Dan Hull joined the meeting at 2.16 pm for agenda item 24.*

### **24. Update on the Work of the Internal Communications Group (ICG) October 2024 – March 2025**

Dan Hull provided an update on the activities of ICG for the period October 2024 to March 2025, which mainly covered discussion with the Welsh Parliament on the requirements for the joint staff survey report and with stakeholders on the various aspects of the staff survey findings.

Dan noted that ICG had consistently expressed the view that regular updates should be provided to staff on any discussion and actions which are taking place in response to the findings of the staff survey, including two-way communication at business area level.

SMT noted that TUS had made similar comments at a recent Employee Relations Board meeting, that it was mindful of the need to communicate with staff, agreed that an update would issue in May following a meeting with HoBs and that consideration would be given to ensuring how staff were kept updated on a regular basis.

SMT thanked Dan and the members of ICG for all their work on the staff survey.

*Dan Hull left the meeting at 2.28 pm.*

## **CORPORATE SERVICES CONTINUED**

### **12. Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings**

Steven presented and sought approval of an update paper on the defects in the roof of Parliament Buildings, for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its meeting scheduled for 9 April 2025.

Steven advised that a further roof options papers had been requested, and that the paper presented would outline delivery options.

Following consideration, SMT approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting, subject to any amendment that may be required following consideration of the options paper.

### **15. Appointment of a Northern Ireland Commissioner for Standards**

Lesley presented and sought approval of a draft Assembly Commission paper on the appointment of a Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Lesley advised that the tenure of the current Commissioner for Standards ends on 6 September 2025 and that the Assembly Commission was responsible for the recruitment of the new Commissioner and agreeing the terms and conditions of appointment.

Following consideration, SMT approved the paper for presentation to the Assembly Commission at its meeting scheduled for 9 April 2025, subject to the inclusion of some additional information that was awaited.

## **OTHER ITEMS**

### **25. SMT Papers Cleared via Correspondence**

Second Variation to the Business Case for the Procurement of Replacement Devices, Network Components and Secure Remote Access.

### **26. Items Cleared via Correspondence**

SMT Register of Interests – updated March 2025.

### **27. Directors' Updates**

#### **Corporate Services**

Steven provided an update on the work undertaken by all business areas within the Corporate Services Directorate and, in particular, highlighted the refurbishment of the Blue Flax Restaurant; electronic access control; the cleaning of the exterior of Parliament Buildings; the re-decoration of room B28; and the Support Services and Aramark new app.

In relation to Directorate meetings, Steven referred to the fact that the same speakers attended all three of the recent Directorate meetings, and he said if this was to be the case for future Directorate meetings then there should just be one meeting for all Directorates.

SMT confirmed that these were Directorate meetings, rather than all staff meetings, and that they should continue to take place at a Directorate level, with the content to be set by the Director, subject to consideration of any wider corporate matters that may require communication.

Steven said he would raise this issue with the Internal Communications Officer.

#### **Legal, Governance and Research Services**

Tara Caul provided an update on all business areas within the Legal, Governance and Research Services Directorate.

In particular, Tara noted that the new Head of RaISe would be taking up post in May and recorded her thanks to the Procurement Office for the amount of work that was being undertaken following implementation of the Procurement Act 2023.

Tara also referred to the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Working Group, and it was agreed that the Clerk/Chief Executive and Directors would meet to discuss an AI Strategy.

## **Parliamentary Services**

SMT noted the work undertaken by all business areas within the Parliamentary Services Directorate and, in particular, highlighted that the new legislative drafting software, Lawmaker, was on target to go live on 1 April 2025. SMT was extremely pleased that the project remained on target and congratulated the Project Team on their excellent work to deliver the project.

### **28. AOB**

There was no other business.

### **29. Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 2 May 2025.

### **30. Proposals for Agenda Items for Next Meeting**

- Proposed Revisions to Calculations Included Within the Staff Handbook
- Revisions to the Prepayment Policy
- Defects in the Roof of Parliament Buildings
- Good Relations Action Plan 2022-2025 Closure Report, Public Consultation Report and Draft Action Plan for 2025-2030
- Disability Action Plan Five Year Review Report, Public Consultation Report and Draft Action Plan 2025-2030
- Biannual Review of Directorate Risk Registers
- Sensitivity Review 2004/2005 Release
- Legal Services Office Apprenticeship
- Business Case Options to Implement Electronic Document Record Management
- Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Complaints Policy and Procedure Report for 2024-25
- Business Case for Renewal of Microsoft Enterprise Agreement 2025
- Portraits
- Historical Institutional Abuse Memorial
- Strategic Communications Update

The meeting ended at 3.16 pm.